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## Effective comprehension strategies in the elementary classroom

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## Effective comprehension strategies in the elementary classroom

### Abstract

This paper focuses on key fiction and nonfiction comprehension strategies and different methods for teaching these strategies in the elementary classroom. It is essential to use effective comprehension instruction within the classroom to unlock meaning and to build student success. These strategies include activating background knowledge, questioning, summarizing, and text structures.

# EFFECTIVE COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

A Graduate Research Project

Submitted to the

Division of Literacy Education

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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By

Melissa Ann Determan

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Has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the  
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### **Abstract**

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Comprehension is currently a very hot topic in education, and it has been overlooked in many programs because of the lack of research, and the focus in these programs has been placed on other reading components such as phonics (Liang & Dole, 2006). Teaching students about phonics is valuable; however, due to comprehension instruction being overlooked, many students are failing to understand the texts they encounter. Educators should explicitly teach comprehension strategies that can be applied to all texts. In many classrooms, teachers instruct their students based on an individualized strategy that may not be applicable to all texts. Eilers and Pinkley (2006) suggest that explicit instruction of comprehension strategies should take place in the primary grades where "...students in primary grades may benefit from explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies at the same time they are learning to decode words" (p. 13). Comprehension strategies are not effectively taught in some elementary classrooms and teaching these explicitly will help assist students in understanding the text. The explicit model of I Do (the teacher does everything), We Do (the teacher allows students to help), They Do (the students practice with their peers and receive feedback), and You Do (the students apply the strategy independently), allows a teacher to guide their students along in comprehending a particular text.

Durkin's, (1979) landmark study described classrooms in which teacher generated, questions about specific text were the norm for reading comprehension instruction. She reported that reading comprehension instruction focused on the literal recall of the current text being read rather than on strategies for understanding all text. Nearly thirty years later, reading instruction in many classrooms involves a scenario where each week students read a story as a whole group from a basal text, then read the selection as homework. Those students are

tested over the story for which they receive a grade in reading. Although students read the story as a whole group, are assigned the story to be read as homework, and occasionally re-read the story in a small group setting, students are frequently unable to answer the multiple choice questions required to pass the comprehension tests. (Eilers & Pinkley, 2006, p. 14)

Students need to be proficient in many different comprehension strategies; however, background knowledge, questioning, summarizing, and text feature and structure are continuously present in professional literature (Boynton & Blevins, 2004; Coyne, Zipoli, Chard, Faggella-Luby, Ruby, Santoro, & Baker, 2009, Eilers & Pinkley, 2006; Fielding & Pearson, 1994; Liang & Dole, 2006; Marinak & Gambrell, 2009; Massey, 2003; Raphael & Au, 2005; Snowball, 2006; Soalt, 2005; Stahl, 2004; Zygouris-Coe, Wiggins, & Smith, 2005). According to the research, educators need to explicitly teach these strategies to assist their students in comprehending text independently (Fielding & Pearson, 1994). It is imperative that students gain in comprehension beyond the text, especially as teachers educate in an era of high stakes testing (Raphael & Au, 2005).

“...students will be expected to read comfortably across genres within fiction, nonfiction, procedural texts, and poetry. They will be required to successfully answer questions, 70% to 80% of which call for the integration, interpretation, critique, and evaluation of texts read independently...Over half of the higher level questions will require students to provide a short or extended written response rather than simply to select from multiple-choice options” (Raphael & Au, 2005, p. 206-207).

With the education system changing due to the importance of one high-stakes test, it is essential that educators are properly preparing their students to comprehend the texts they will encounter.

## **Rationale**

In my experiences teaching Title I in an elementary school with a high poverty population, I have seen many students struggle with comprehension. Comprehension is the reason why people read, to gain knowledge or for enjoyment. I also remember as a child in elementary school having a difficult time comprehending text. It seems that the curriculum programs my school district has cycled through introduce new comprehension strategies daily and/or weekly. Because of this rapid introduction of strategies, my students have found it difficult to master any skill or strategy due to lack of practice time. A high number of my students do not reach grade level in reading comprehension, based on the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Leveled Reading Assessment. This high percentage of below grade level performance peaked my interest in researching effective comprehension strategies that would help to ensure providing my students the best instruction for comprehension. In addition, throughout my graduate work, I became intrigued with the prospect of becoming a reading coach, one who works with other educators on improving instruction in reading strategies, especially in regard to improving comprehension of struggling readers. The creation of a professional development program that focuses on effective comprehension strategies addressed both my desire to improve student performance in reading comprehension and my interest as a future reading coach in the professional development of classroom teachers. Through my research, I hope to provide a clear picture on the best ways to teach comprehension strategies within the classroom. Comprehension is the reason we read, so it is extremely important that educators have a deep understanding of how to teach comprehension strategies. Educators need to teach comprehension strategies, how to select

comprehension strategies during reading, and allow their students ample independent practice time.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to design a three-year professional development plan for an elementary school. My goal was to provide teachers, literacy coaches, and administrators a resource to use as they look to implement comprehension strategies into the classrooms as a means of improving all students' comprehension. In creating the professional development plan, I hoped to gain insight in the literacy coach role, as well as, support something I know all of my students need in the classroom. I wanted my materials to be very useful and easy to apply within the classroom setting. As an educator, I strived to gain a better understanding into particular strategies that could easily be incorporated into the classroom and more importantly to improve student achievement.

### **Terminology**

- Conditional Knowledge – where and when to use strategies in a text: (Block, Parris, & Whiteley, 2008, p. 460)
- Declarative Knowledge – understanding how the comprehension process works: (Block, Parris, & Whiteley, 2008, p. 460)
- Explicit Instruction – involves teaching in 4 phases: (Fielding & Pearson, 1994, p. 64)
  - 1.) (I DO) teacher modeling and explanation of a strategy
  - 2.) (WE DO) guided practice during which teachers gradually give students more responsibility for task completion

3.) (THEY DO) independent practice accompanied by feedback

4.) (YOU DO) application of the strategy in read reading situations

- Metacognition – using multiple strategies at one time during reading: (Eilers & Pinkley, 2006).
- Procedural Knowledge – understanding how to use each strategy independently: (Block, Parris, & Whiteley, 2008, p. 460)

### **Research Questions**

The primary question guiding this research project is: What are the most effective comprehension strategies to teach to elementary students? From the primary question, four other questions evolved:

1. What is the best method for teaching these comprehension strategies?
2. Is there a difference between comprehension strategies used for fiction and nonfiction text?
3. How do we teach kids to select these strategies during their reading?
4. What are the most effective strategies to improve students' metacognition?

## Chapter II

### Literature Review

A question that most elementary teachers have in their daily practice is, *How do I best teach my students to comprehend what they are reading?* “Although comprehension instruction has always been an important part of reading research and teaching, it has been somewhat overlooked in the last few decades in favor of issues related to beginning reading, phonics, and decoding” (Liang & Dole, 2006, p. 1). Educators realize that comprehension is extremely important and the purpose for reading, but teaching about strategies for making meaning is very complex. “Good readers use many strategies simultaneously while reading, while struggling readers have troubles with remembering a single strategy or when to use the strategies they know” (Coyne, Zipoli, Chard, Faggella-Luby, Ruby, Santbro, & Baker, 2009).

Comprehension is described in the literature in fourteen key areas: background knowledge (Boynton & Blevins, 2004), decoding (Massey, 2003), monitor to fix-up (Massey, 2003), motivation (Soalt, 2005), predicting (Massey, 2003), purpose (Block, Parris, & Whiteley, 2008), questioning (Snowball, 2006; Zygouris-Coe, Wiggins, & Smith, 2005), retelling (Snowball, 2006; Zygouris-Coe, Wiggins, & Smith, 2005), summarizing (Snowball, 2006; Zygouris-Coe, Wiggins, & Smith, 2005), text feature (Boynton & Blevins, 2004), text structure (Boynton & Blevins, 2004), thinking aloud (Block, Parris, & Whiteley, 2008), visualizing (Boynton & Blevins, 2004), and vocabulary (Boynton & Blevins, 2004).

We know that a good comprehender uses existing knowledge to make sense of new information; asks questions about the text before, during, and after reading; draws inferences from text; monitors his or her comprehension; uses fix-up strategies when meaning breaks down; determines what is important; and

synthesizes information to create sensory images. (Zygouris-Coe, Wiggins, & Smith, 2005, p. 381)

Across these varied components affecting comprehension, three areas are found consistently in the literature addressing both fiction and nonfiction texts: background knowledge (Boynton & Blevins, 2004; Coyne, Zipoli, Chard, Faggella-Luby, Ruby, Santoro, & Baker, 2009), questioning (Stahl, 2004), summarizing (Massey, 2003; Snowball, 2006), and text features and structures (Boynton & Blevins, 2004).

### **Background Knowledge**

Building background knowledge for students is very important for their ability to comprehend the texts, especially when reading nonfiction texts (Boynton & Blevins, 2004). According to Boynton & Blevins (2004), nonfiction texts are found in many standardized tests and are used beyond education; therefore, it is essential that students master reading this type of text through their elementary, middle, and high school experiences (Boynton & Blevins, 2004). “Students build upon their prior experiences and their linguistic and experiential knowledge to assimilate and consolidate new knowledge by expanding, evaluating, and refining. Background knowledge is critical to reading comprehension” (Coyne, et al, 2009, p. 235).

Through the use of some key teaching strategies, educators can assist their students in understanding the breadth of topics discussed in schools, giving them the power to understand a variety of informational topics (Boynton & Blevins, 2004). This is a lifelong lesson, because building upon existing knowledge happens daily as students learn new things about the world around them (Coyne, et al, 2009). Given the diversity of the students that enter schools in the United States, educators need to be prepared for students with varying backgrounds and experiences (United States Census Bureau, 2012).

According to the United States Census Bureau, the population of people ages three to thirty-four enrolled in school have changed significantly in the past forty years. In comparing the 1970 census to the 2010 census, Table 1 shows the difference in populations:

Table 1

*U.S. Population Changes of Ages 3-34 Enrolled in School*

1970 population ages 3-34 enrolled in school		2010 population ages 3-34 enrolled in school	
White	51,719,000	White	31,388,000
		White (Non-Hispanic)	22,816,000
		Total	54,204,000
Black	7,829,000	Black	6,164,000
		Asian	1,907,000
Other	810,000	Hispanic	9,436,000
		Total	11,343,000

(United States Census Bureau, 2012)

With such a diverse population currently in the schools, it is important for students to be able to bring to the school setting the diversity of their own background knowledge.

Connecting a child's own background knowledge to texts will help foster their understanding of the author's message and content being addressed (Coyne, et al, 2009).

Through the use of background knowledge teaching strategies, teachers will have one of the keys to unlocking comprehension (Boynton & Blevins, 2004).

“Teachers must explicitly and directly scaffold students in connecting prior knowledge to desired knowledge about a particular subject or topic” (Coyne, et al, 2009, p. 235). Educators can use these effective strategies for explicitly teaching background knowledge to their students: use of KWL charts, Smart Charts, and pairing of fiction and nonfiction texts.



A great way to informally assess what students know about a particular topic is to use a KWL chart. This is an instructional strategy that provides students with a chart that describes What we Know, What we Want to know, and What we Learned. To begin a lesson, the educator would document what the students know, and then ask the students what questions they have about the topic to elicit their own curiosity and their own knowledge or lack of knowledge of the content to be read. After questions have been collected, the students then begin reading the text. This allows the students to think about the particular topic before reading and to hear from their peers other possible ways to think about the content to be read. Building upon prior knowledge as a whole group is very powerful and relates to how well the students will be able to comprehend the content of the text. Educators can understand what their students currently know and what questions they have about a topic to guide their decisions on what is needed for them to teach (Coyne, et al, 2009). KWL charts also provide the students with a purpose for reading that will help them focus on the content to see if their questions are addressed; further, if their questions are not addressed, students can then research their questions in other texts to find answers. This leads to very purposeful reading that extends beyond the initial teacher-directed assignment. "... it is important to consider what it is one wants to learn before reading informational texts. In this case, students' exploration of background knowledge is scaffolded through the use of the KWL chart" (Coyne, et al, 2009, p. 236). Scaffolding groups using a KWL chart will continue to challenge students who know about this topic by accessing their prior knowledge, as well as, to give students who are inexperienced with the topic a chance to build some understanding with the teacher and their peers, providing a purpose for reading.

Boynton and Blevins (2004) took the idea of a KWL chart one step further by adding another column titled *Background*. This extension of the KWL is referred to by Boynton and Blevins as the *Smart Chart*. Students need to make a habit of hooking the new information they read to the information they already know. Educators can use a Smart Chart by filling out the What we Know column with their students just like a typical KWL chart. Upon filling this out, the teacher can share other facts under the Background column that will be useful for the students to know before they begin reading, including sharing with the children where the information was found, trying to make the students understand that knowledge comes from many resources, as well as building upon their existing knowledge (Boynton and Blevins, 2004). In addition to giving the students more information prior to reading, the teacher should encourage the students to research for other information to add to the background column during their independent reading times. Rich discussions can take place on how the students found the information to add to the background column. In this way the activity is more student-centered, as the students are in control of the discussion and their learning. But there are opportunities for the teacher to step in and provide teachable moments during the students' discussions, highlighting specific skills used or sources addressed. Educators can guide the students into new discoveries by using this technique.

In addition, with the use of charts during instruction, teachers can pair fiction and nonfiction texts together so the students can gain knowledge on a given topic and extend the new knowledge into more challenging books (Soalt, 2005). To maximize learning, a fictional text would be chosen for the students to read such as *Magic Tree House Polar Bears Past Bedtime*, by Mary Pope Osborne. After completing the fictional text and

adding to the chart, the students would then read *Magic Tree House Research Guides Polar Bears and the Arctic*, by Mary Pope Osborne. This allows the students to gain a better understanding of certain topics.

Research has demonstrated the extent to which the comprehension of students in general, and English-language learners in particular, is affected by their degree of background knowledge, vocabulary, and motivation. The level of those three prerequisites for comprehension can be improved by teaching units of study that contain fictional and informational books on the same topic. (Soalt, 2005, p. 680)

Pairing texts is effective for all students because it allows them to become engaged in a particular topic at a deeper level and to become experts of a sort on that topic. Students strive to become experts about particular topics they find interesting (Soalt, 2005). Using nonfiction texts helps support students' prior knowledge but also serve to extend prior knowledge as well. "Exploring informational texts prior to reading fictional texts on the same topic activates background knowledge of the topic and builds it for students without prior knowledge" (Soalt, 2005, p. 680).

Comprehension is very complex, but a key to assisting students in comprehending what they read is to build upon their background knowledge. Students are coming from more diverse homes and come to school with very different experiences (United States Census, 2012). Educators need to give students opportunities to discuss their knowledge about topics through the use of KWL charts and smart charts, and through pairing fiction and nonfiction together (Boynton & Blevins, 2004; Coyne, et al, 2009; Soalt, 2005).

Reading a plethora of different texts throughout the school year provides rich experiences with different text structures and a wide range of content that will enable every student in the classroom to have something to share during class discussions, and provides students who are accelerated with the opportunity to share what they know with their peers.

## Questioning

Questioning is another very important comprehension strategy. Stahl (2004) found in her experiences as an elementary and middle school educator, as well as a literacy researcher, that educators need to employ the use of questioning as a strategy while reading. “Question answering and question-answering instruction can lead to an improvement in memory for what was read, improvement in finding information in text, and deeper processing of text” (Stahl, 2004, p. 600). Stahl argues it is important for children to generate meaning from text and be able to add it to their prior knowledge rather than just memorize a few key points. To do this, students need to be able to think about both what a question asks and where that information can be located. “Young students benefit from being taught to consider the answer sources needed to respond to questions generated by teachers or others” (Stahl, 2004, p. 606). Some helpful questioning strategies include: 3-2-1, reciprocal teaching, QtA, and QAR.

According to Zygouris-Coe, Wiggins, and Smith (2005), use of the 3-2-1 strategy will assist students in understanding the text. This strategy uses student-generated summarizing and questioning. The students summarize three important things about what they read, then they list two things they found interesting, and finally they ask one question they still have about the topic or text. Teachers can enhance comprehension through the use of this strategy and having their students follow the components in writing instead of discussion. Zygouris-Coe et al. suggest that comprehension is further enhanced when the 3-2-1 strategy is used via writing rather than discussion alone; students are less likely to rely on their peers. There is a plethora of research proving a large correlation between success in reading and writing; therefore, it is essential to allow

students with opportunities to write. “Whether a student’s generated question is concrete or abstract in nature, the reader might become more motivated in further studies about the topic at hand” (Zygouris-Coe, Wiggins, & Smith, 2005, p. 382). Igniting the motivation for further learning on topics is the goal of education. Educators strive for all students to become self-learners. This is a key idea for education and presents the best basis for learning, the students being self-learners and being motivated.

Snowball (2006) found that the teaching of comprehension in schools is essential to students’ academic success. Reciprocal teaching is a strategy that employs the use of four main comprehension strategies: predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing (Snowball, 2006). Snowball argues that as students are reading a given text, questions naturally generate because of the human curiosity, and it is important to have a discussion or journaling time\*for the students to get their questions answered. Students reach a higher level of understanding when asking and answering questions.

Massey (2003) developed a comprehension checklist for students to use as a guide while reading any given text. The table below provides an overview of the checklist developed by Massey.

Table 2

*A comprehension checklist*


---

When you read, ask yourself: Does it make sense? If it doesn't make sense, place a check beside which of the following comprehension strategies you used.

---

Prereading: Before you started reading, did you

- Set a purpose for reading – what do you need to find or figure out?
  - Think about what you already know about the topic – a lot or a little?
  - Look at the pictures and predict what the story is going to be about?
  - Read the captions?
  - Read the bold words?
  - Read the table of contents?
  - Read any summaries?
  - Read the questions at the end of the chapter?
- 

During reading: While you were reading, did you

- Skip the word – is it one word that doesn't make sense? Did you try skipping that word and reading to the end of the sentence or paragraph? Did you go back to see if you knew what the word was or if you knew what it meant?
  - Reread the paragraph and look for new information?
  - Keep a mental picture of what's happening in your head?
  - Summarize – stop every page or two pages and summarize the main points?
  - Find that you could go on, or do you need more information from another student or teacher?
- 

After reading: After you finished reading, did you

- Do a text check – was this text too hard, too easy, or just right?
  - Reread the section, looking for new details?
  - Develop questions – what might the teacher ask? What might be on a test?
  - Check your predictions – were you right? If you weren't, did you decide why?
- 

(Massey, 2003, p. 82) Comprehension Check List for guiding reading comprehension before, during, and after reading a text.

Through the use of this table, teachers can use the suggested prompts to scaffold their students during small group reading because items can be added or subtracted to meet the needs of the individual student. When the teacher to student ratio is about 1:6, the teacher is able to have mini-conferences with the students during their reading, guiding

them to these questions (Massey, 2003). The teacher could group the students based on their needs to provide specific instruction to address those needs. Massey (2003) describes the different times during reading that readers will ask questions, which primarily happens during or after a text is read. Questioning is a key strategy to get the students to fully become engaged and understand the meaning of texts. This is particularly true when students use questioning before reading to help guide their expectations of the meaning to be derived from the text. Using questioning, students will be able to determine if they understand the concepts in the particular texts, as well as, to decide if they need more information.

Another strategy to use in the classroom to improve the strategy of questioning is through the use of the Questioning the Author (QtA) framework (Liang & Dole, 2006). Educators can use this method to improve their students' understandings of text, through constructing meaning from a particular text rather than extracting information from it. When students construct meaning from text, they relate it to their existing knowledge and when they extract information, they just pull out facts. Constructing meaning leads to a much deeper understanding of the text (Liang & Dole, 2006). The strategy was developed to teach students to question, think, probe, associate, and critique the fallibility of authors to interact with text in a different way than previously taught (Liang & Dole, 2006). Higher level discussions can also arise in the classroom based on this questioning method when four key features are address:

- 1) viewing the text as a fallible product written by fallible authors, 2) dealing with the text through questions that are directed toward making sense of it, 3) questioning as students are reading, and 4) encouraging student collaboration in the construction of meaning. (Liang & Dole, 2006, p. 4)

Teachers will ask broad questions about a particular text to get a discussion going; for example, *What is the author trying to tell us here?* or *Where is the author going with this?* (Liang & Dole, 2006). The students will then generate information from the text, as well as, connect their background knowledge. As Liang and Dole argue, discussion of text cannot be contrived and forced into one silo; it must be loose and go the directions the students wish to take it. Using these multiple approaches will ultimately lead to independent readers who become motivated (Fielding & Pearson, 1994). Using student led discussion is very powerful. Liang and Dole did acknowledge the amount of teacher preparation is typically high during the implementation of this method, but preparation time will reduce as the students become independent.

There are many different ways to develop questions from a text. Stahl (2004) suggests four kinds of questions: right there questions (to find the information directly in the text), think and search questions (to combine multiple pages of the text and synthesize the information), the text and you questions (to combine prior knowledge and the information just gained from the text), and on your own questions (to develop an answer that is not in the text). Generating questions in this fashion is called Question Answer Relationship (QAR) and have been found to be useful; "...a series of studies determined that students in grades 2 through 8 could benefit from instruction in QAR" (Stahl, 2004, p. 601).

To be judged as proficient in reading fiction, students must demonstrate that they can think deeply about and write in response to questions that address themes and lessons, elements of plot structures, and multiple points of view. To demonstrate high levels of literacy when reading nonfiction, students will need to draw on their knowledge of text organization (e.g., description, causal relationships, logical connections) and be able to identify important details in texts, graphs, photos, and other materials (Raphael & Au, 2005, p. 207).



Educators need to teach questioning to make comprehension which is invisible become visible through using QAR. By developing a common language within the classroom, all students will be able to effectively communicate what they are doing or be able to ask a question (Raphael & Au, 2005). The common language is broken into two main categories of questions: in the book and in my head. These have subcategories that include for in the book, right there (an answer to a question that is in one place of a given text), and think and search (an answer to a question that is located in multiple places of the text). For the in my head questions, the subcategories include, author and me (using pieces of the text and pieces of my background knowledge to answer a question), and on my own (the answer is not in text and the student must use what they currently know to answer the question) (Raphael & Au, 2005).

Questioning is a very important comprehension strategy as Raphael and Au (2005) point out. “Such metacognitive knowledge about questioning and related strategies supports students in their day-to-day work with text, as well as when they must take a high-stakes test” (Raphael & Au, 2005, p. 217). Using the 3-2-1 strategy will promote summarizing, questioning, and pair reading with writing thus motivating students to want to know more (Zygouris-Coe, Wiggins, & Smith, 2005). Reciprocal teaching is also another questioning strategy that can help students reach a higher level of understanding when asking and answering questions (Snowball, 2006). Providing students with a comprehension checklist will help them see the invisible process of comprehending and will help the students be independent (Massey, 2003). QtA is questioning the author and helps students understand that there is fallibility in text. Teachers ask broad questions about text to get a discussion going; for example, *What is*

*the author trying to tell us here? or Where is the author going with this?* (Liang & Dole, 2006). Lastly, QAR is another very important questioning strategy. Raphael and Au (2005) urge educators to create a common language within the classroom based on questioning to teach the students how to understand questions based on text. These question types include in the book questions; right there, and think & search, and in my head questions; author & me and on my own.

### **Summarizing**

“Summarizing is beneficial to readers in several ways... when students recapitulate what they have read, they not only gain understandings of text structures but also learn about text conventions, vocabulary, reading flexibility, and self-confidence” (Zygouris-Coe, Wiggins, & Smith, 2005, p. 382). When students summarize what they have read, it encourages them to remember the main ideas and key details of the text (Snowball, 2006). Snowball has found that the act of summarizing assists students in gaining more knowledge from text, enabling students to make connections and generate questions about the text. Snowball (2006) points out that summarizing is one of the key comprehension strategies that various researchers have identified in comprehension studies.

Summarizing is the act of being able to retell the important events of a text. To assist with summarizing, children need to pause frequently in a given text to summarize what they have just read (Massey, 2003). Massey (2003) suggested that students need to stop on every page or every other page while they are reading a text at their instructional level. The frequent pauses in reading will allow the student time to think about what they have read, instead of just word calling the entire text. Massey argues that when students

pause to think about their reading, they will be filing these mini-summaries in their brain in order to formulate a larger summary of the entire text. This method can easily be scaffolded to give the students what they need. If students are having a very difficult time with summarizing, the teacher can reduce the text to just a paragraph instead of every page or two. The teacher should be guiding the students toward what information is important in a text and what information is a minor detail in the text. Massey (2003) recommends prereading activities such as text walking (looking at the pictures, captions, boldfaced words, and reading any questions given) to assist students in grasping a better understanding of a particular text. Furthermore, during reading she suggests students should visualize what they are reading, to stop every page or two for a quick summary, and to think if they need any help. Massey (2003) also addresses after reading, suggesting that students need to think if the text was a good fit for them (not too hard or easy), reread the selection, think about any questions that may be asked, and confirm their predictions.

While summarization of text is very important, it can be challenging for students to master. Teachers need to assess where their students are and scaffold them in their summaries. Some students will be able to summarize larger chunks of texts, while others will need assistance at the end of each paragraph. Teachers will need to model what information is important from a given text and which information is just a minor detail. When students can summarize, it unlocks doors to being able to make connections and generate questions.

## **Text Structure and Features**

Researchers have found the use of text structures and features to be a key in comprehension (Snowball, 2006). Stahl (2004) states that most fictional text is set up in the same manner, including: setting, characters, events, attempts to solve the problem, and a solution. Using a story map or graphic organizer can help students to remember these important parts of fictional stories. Due to the repetitive nature of fictional texts, less time can be spent on instruction in this area once the students have grasped the strategy, and more instructional time should then be spent on the text structures of nonfiction text.

It is essential to teach children the structures of texts to allow them to navigate and fully decipher the different genres of text (Boynton & Blevins, 2004). This type of instruction is particularly critical when students are encountering a nonfiction text, because they have so many similar and differing structures, as opposed to fiction (Stahl, 2004). Some of the nonfiction text features include: boldfaced words, a glossary, headings (sub-headings), an index, photographs with captions, and a table of contents. Teaching these components of nonfiction texts can also be found in Massey's (2003) prereading strategies. Students need to understand the layout of nonfiction text for optimum comprehension to take place. When students follow the same procedure when encountering nonfiction texts, they are better able to comprehend the information given (Boynton & Blevins, 2004). Another suggestion for teaching text structure is to teach key words or phrases.

One effective way to help students identify nonfiction structures is to teach words and phrases that frequently signal organization. For example, if students know that words such as like, unlike, and in contrast are often used when one thing is being compared to another, they can readily spot the author's intention, and

they'll be better equipped to understand the text as a whole. Your students' own informational writing will also benefit when their knowledge of various text structures increases (Boynton & Blevins, 2004, p. 4).

Teaching the structures of nonfiction text is also important to students being able to comprehend text (Marinak & Gambrell, 2009). Common structures of nonfiction text include: enumeration, time order, compare and contrast, cause and effect, and question and answer (Marinak & Gambrell, 2009).

Table 3

*Nonfiction Text Structures*

Structure	Definition	Signal Words
Enumeration	A major idea is supported by a list of details and examples.	For instance, for example, such as, to illustrate, another
Time Order	A major idea is supported by details. Both major ideas and supporting details must be in a particular sequence.	At, first, next, last, before, after, finally, following
Compare and Contrast	The supporting details of two or more major ideas indicate how those concepts are similar or different.	But, different from, same as, similar to, as opposed to, instead of, however, compared with, as well as, both, while
Cause and Effect	The supporting details give the causes of a major idea or the supporting details are the results produced by the major idea.	Because of, as a result of, in order to, may be due to, effects of, therefore, consequently, for this reason, if...then, causing, allow
Question and Answer	The major idea is posed as a question. Supporting details answer the question.	Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

(Marinak & Gambrell, 2009, p. 20) Structures of Informational Text

Table 2 provides key words that can be taught to students to help them understand the structural differences of informational text by looking at signal words and understanding what message the author is trying to convey. “Research indicates that a student’s comprehension improves with explicit instruction about informational text structure” (Marinak & Gambrell, 2009, p. 22). By understanding the text structures, student writing will also improve based on their knowledge of various text structures (Boynton & Blevins, 2004).

Educators must explicitly teach these text features and structures in order for their students to comprehend nonfiction text. Through teaching about text features and structures, students will develop a much better understanding of the text they are encountering. Students should be viewing nonfiction texts at least fifty percent of their day as we know to be successful in school, work, the community, and everyday life, they will be reading and engaging in nonfiction text (Marinak & Gambrell, 2009).

### **Summary**

This review focused on comprehension strategies and teaching methods to assist in students understanding of both fiction and nonfiction texts that they read. Comprehension is a complex process because children need to use many strategies at once in order to succeed. Activating background knowledge, questioning, summarizing, and text features and structures are considered some of the key components of comprehension. Using a variety of teaching methods will ensure that all students have a better opportunity to read and comprehend text.

## Chapter III

### Methodology

The purpose of this project was to create a professional development plan for an elementary school staff to use when teaching reading comprehension within their classrooms. The literature review was created with a variety of references from a variety of sources. I used peer reviewed articles found on EBSCO, ERIC, and Wilson. The focus of my search highlighted the key words *reading comprehension*, *instructional strategies* and *reading comprehension*, and *comprehension* and *text*. In addition to articles, I found references from the reference list in the articles or books I read.

In regard to the Professional Development Plan, I used the same references as those used in my literature review. I looked through the resources and chose the articles and books that I felt were the most teacher friendly in order to ensure the effectiveness of the professional development plan. In addition to these resources, I used a book (Vogt & Shearer, 2007) which was created for reading specialists and literacy coaches. This textbook helped in creating and developing the three-year professional development plan. The purpose of using these resources over a three-year period of time was to ensure the teachers had a useful and effective learning time.

The professional development plan includes a three-year timetable. In the plan, I set up agendas, materials, and a budget that are essential to making this plan work. I believe it is necessary to take some time to adjust and revise. A three-year professional development plan will allow teachers to learn a portion of the strategies, apply and practice these with their students, come together to share successes and questions, and confirm learning before moving forward to additional strategies. In my experience, when

having an in-service day filled with too much information, it is very overwhelming and I find it very easy to slip back into my old routine. Change takes time, and I wanted to make sure time was used valuably and, it also allowed for teachers to really learn, reflect, and put their learning into practice. In the final part of the project, teachers are surveyed and evaluated, in addition to how student achievement was effected.



## **Chapter IV**

### **The Project**

This project highlights instructional practices for comprehension over a three-year professional development time span. The project includes goals, professional resources, activities for the professional resources, in-services and workshops, demonstration lessons, self-assessment, student outcomes, evaluation, and estimated budget.

**Context:**

Elementary School Professional Development Plan

Created by Melissa Determan, Reading Specialist

The Literacy Team: Reading Specialist, Principal, ELL Teacher, Special Education Teacher, Kindergarten Teacher, First Grade Teacher, Second Grade Teacher, Third Grade Teacher, Fourth Grade Teacher, Fifth Grade Teacher, Parents

Targeted Need: Improving student reading comprehension in Grades K-5

School Description: An elementary building with two sections of each grade level kindergarten through fifth grade, reading and writing blocks in each classroom consisting of 120 minutes per day, and intervention blocks in each classroom consisting of twenty minutes per day.

#### **Goals of Professional Development**

1. Establish a research foundation for, and understandings of the comprehension process.
2. Provide all faculty and instructional assistants with relevant and effective in-service and follow-up support that focuses on instructional methods, materials, and approaches for teaching reading comprehension.

3. Give staff time and support while they implement techniques for comprehension within their classrooms.
4. Use Informal Reading Inventories assess student comprehension to effectively instruct students in all reading groups.
5. Increase student achievement scores on formative and summative assessments.

### **Currently Used Instructional Materials and Approaches**

- As a literacy team, we will survey all staff members about current methods, approaches, and instructional materials used for teaching comprehension.
- Basal Reading Program
- Guided Reading
- Fountas and Pinnell Reading Inventory

### **Professional Resources**

Purchase one copy for each faculty member:

Block, C. , Parris, S. , & Whiteley, C. (2008). CPMS: A kinesthetic comprehension strategy. *The Reading Teacher*, 61(6), 460-470.

Purchase six copies of the following book:

Block, C. , Rodgers, L. , & Johnson, R. (2004). Comprehension process instruction: Creating reading success in grades k-3. *Guilford Publications*.

Duplicate these articles and have ready for the week(s) before professional development:

Boynton, A., & Blevins, W. (2004). 5 Keys to reading nonfiction: Learning about text features and structure gives students new strategies for comprehension. *Instructor*, 113(5), 4-6.

Massey, D. D., (2003). A comprehension checklist: What if it doesn't make sense? *The Reading Teacher*. 57(1), 81-84.

Raphael, T. E., & Au, K. H. (2005). QAR: Enhancing comprehension and test-taking across grades and content areas. *The Reading Teacher*, 59(3), 206-221.

Zygouris-Coe, V., Wiggins, M. B., & Smith, L. H. (2005). Engaging students with text: The 3-2-1 strategy. *The Reading Teacher*. 58(4), 381-384.

### **Suggested Activities for Professional Resources**

- During a school faculty meeting, review the comprehension gains by grade level and discuss what works and what does not work.
- Literature-talk the new books and articles the Literacy Team has selected.
- Invite staff members (including administrators and instructional assistants) to form grade-level discussion and study groups for the professional books.
- Offer an in-service on how to use Informal Reading Inventories; include opportunities for teachers to analyze results; provide time for grade-level teams to meet to discuss effective comprehension instruction.

### **In-Services and Workshops**

- Offer an in-service on comprehension instruction, to establish a foundation of current research.
- Offer at least one workshop on how to analyze results from an Informal Reading Inventory.
- Offer one or more workshops on how to use IRIs to assess comprehension, fluency, and word recognition for grouping purposes.

- Offer at least one workshop on comprehension strategies for background knowledge, questioning, summarizing, and text features and structures.
- Survey faculty to see what additional in-service might be needed.
- Encourage and coordinate attendance at professional reading conferences, as the budget will allow.
- Encourage teachers who have used guided reading in their classrooms to share with other teachers during an after-school workshop.

### **Demonstration Lessons**

Offer and then schedule demonstration lessons on the following topics:

- Teaching of comprehension strategies whole group
- Guided reading lesson format
- Teaching comprehension in small groups
- Management of students not meeting in small group
- Introduction of rotations when not meeting with the teacher
- Others, as requested

### **Self-Assessment/Peer Coaching/Mentoring**

- Discuss possibility of videotaped guided reading lessons and/or whole group comprehension lessons as opportunities for reflective self-assessment. Determine if anyone is interested in forming discussion groups to analyze and reflect on teaching effectiveness of the lessons.
- Determine if any teachers are interested in or willing to establish peer coaching partners. If so, discuss how these might be organized and implemented.
- Establish mentors/coaches for teachers in years 1 to 3 of teaching.

**Student Outcomes**

- Improvement in reading scores as measured by pre-post IRI passages; word recognition, comprehension, fluency, and miscue analyses.
- Improvement in reading scores as measured by the state standardized tests.
- Increase in number of students who are able to read grade-level texts.

**Evaluation**

- Measures (IRI results) for evaluating reading growth in selected (from high, average, and low-performing) students for each grade level.
- Standardized test scores in reading for all students.
- Satisfaction measures (surveys, interviews) of teachers at end of first and second years.
- Evaluations collected at the end of all in-service workshops.

**Estimated Budget**

- Professional resources for teachers and administrators \$700
- Duplicating of journal articles \$150 (\$50 per year)
- Establishing a guided reading library \$3,000
- Materials for in-service \$150 (\$50 per year)
- Conference registrations \$1,000
- Total \$5,000

## **Projected Time Line**

### **Year One**

The staff will complete a survey to determine what is currently done well and what needs improvement, analyze reading data, and learn about comprehension specifically the strategies of building background knowledge and questioning.

### **August**

Topic: Where do we currently stand in comprehension instruction?

- Distribute materials including in-service agenda (see Appendix A)
- Complete comprehension survey (see Appendix B)
- Look at and analyze data
- PowerPoint presentation on comprehension and building background knowledge (see Appendix C)
- Question and answer session about the new professional development plan

### **October**

Topic: Background Knowledge Continued

- Read Boynton, Alice, & Blevins, Wiley (2004). 5 Keys to reading nonfiction: Learning about text features and structure gives students new strategies for comprehension. *Instructor*. 113(5), 4-6.
- Discuss the article and how this could work in the classroom
- Demonstrate an example lesson of using a smart chart. Read excerpt from Magic Tree House Research Guides Polar Bears and the Arctic
- Time for questions

## January

Topic: Background Knowledge Continued & Questioning Introduced

- Smart chart review of Magic Tree House Research Guides Polar Bears and the Arctic, by Mary Pope Osborne
- Celebrations and successes of using a smart chart in classroom
- Pairing fiction and nonfiction texts together. Read excerpt from Magic Tree House Polar Bears Past Bedtime, by Mary Pope Osborne. Discuss the power of pairing fiction and nonfiction.
- Read Zygouris-Coe, Vicky, Wiggins, Matthew B., & Smith, Lourdes H. (2005). Engaging students with text: The 3-2-1 strategy. *The Reading Teacher*. 58(4), 381-384.
- PowerPoint presentation on questioning strategies of 3-2-1 and Massey's table (Appendix D)
- Time for questions

## March

Topic: Questioning Continued

- Quick review of 3-2-1 and Massey's table
- Celebrations and successes of using a strategies in the classroom
- Read Raphael, T. E., & Au, K. H. (2005). QAR: Enhancing comprehension and test-taking across grades and content areas. *The Reading Teacher*, 59(3), 206-221.
- PowerPoint presentation on questioning strategies of QtA and QAR (Appendix E)
- Time for questions

## **Year Two**

The staff will continue to analyze reading data, revisit Year One's strategies of building background and questioning, and learn comprehension strategies of summarization and text features and structures.

### **August**

Topic: Comprehension Revisited and summarization

- Look at and analyze data
- Review building background and questioning strategies
- PowerPoint presentation on summarization
- Assignment: for October, bring in samples of written summarization

### **October**

Topic: Summarization Continued and Text Features

- Share assignment and discuss what is working and what can we improve upon
- PowerPoint presentation on text features
- Time to look through curriculum to highlight upcoming stories using text features

### **January**

Topic: Text Structure

- PowerPoint presentation on text structures
- Time to look through curriculum to highlight upcoming informational stories with the different text structures & look at writing instruction



**May**

Topic: Where are we and where do we need to go?

- Look at and analyze data
- Survey what areas we have improved upon and what areas still need work

**Year Three**

The staff will revisit Year One and Two by examining the strategies that should be in place within their classrooms. These strategies include: building background, questioning, summarization, and text features and structures. The staff will also learn about small group instruction and analyzing data to group students according to their needs.

**August**

Topic: Comprehension Reviewed

- Review of building background, questioning, summarizing, and text features and structure.
- Questions
- What pieces our students are still struggling with

**October**

Topic: Small Group Instruction

- PowerPoint presentation on small group instruction
- Time to collaborate in grade level teams to create small groups of students based on data

**January**

Topic: Comprehension in Small Groups

- PowerPoint presentation on small group instruction for comprehension
- Time to collaborate in grade level teams to create small group lessons targeting comprehension needs

**March**

Topic: Data

- Is comprehension data on the rise?
- Do students understand more through daily observational data within the classroom?

## **Chapter V**

### **Conclusion**

When teachers explicitly teach the four major comprehension strategies which include building background knowledge, questioning, summarizing, and text features and structures, students will be able to understand a variety of texts.

Students are coming from more diverse homes and come to school with very different experiences (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Educators need to allow time for rich discussions to happen within their classrooms because every student is coming into their room with different life experiences.

Raphael and Au (2005) urge educators to create a common language within the classroom based on questioning to teach the students how to understand questions based on text. Questioning is a very important strategy because it is how students are assessed over the material they have read.

Summarizing should be taught and assessed to see if the students are able to summarize after a paragraph or a chapter (Massey, 2003). Teachers will need to model what information is important from a given text and which information is just a minor detail. When students can summarize, it unlocks doors to being able to make connections and generate questions.

Through teaching about text features and structures, students will develop a much better understanding of the text they are encountering. Students should be viewing nonfiction texts at least fifty percent of their day as we know to be successful in school, work, the community, and everyday life, they will be reading and engaging in nonfiction text (Marinak & Gambrell, 2009).

The three-year professional development model will allow teachers time to adjust their instruction while they gain a better understand of how comprehension develops. Teachers will be given ample time to collaborate in grade levels to analyze data, group students based on need, and create lessons. Teachers will also be supported with high quality materials and peer observations throughout the three-year process. Through this collaborative model, teachers will learn from one another, and more importantly the students they serve.

It is hoped that when teachers follow this professional development model, they will start to change the comprehension process within their students. This will help to develop students who are more prepared to face the real world because they are better prepared to comprehend a variety of texts both fiction and nonfiction.

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QAR- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsud7AQWva8>

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**Appendix A**  
**Professional Development Agenda**  
**August Year One**





## Henry Sabin Elementary

### Professional Development Agenda

#### Year 1 ~ August ~ Comprehension

8:15 – 9:00	Ice Breaker
9:00 – 9:30	Comprehension Survey
9:30 – 9:45	Break
9:45 – 11:00	Looking and Analyzing Data
11:00 – 11:30	Presentation on Comprehension
11:30 – 12:30	Lunch
12:30 – 1:15	Introducing Importance of Background Knowledge
1:15 – 1:30	Break
1:30 – 2:15	Question and Answer Session
2:15 – 4:00	Distribute Materials and work in PLC groups/classroom

**Appendix B**  
**Comprehension Survey**  
**August Year One**

As a literacy team, we will survey all staff members about current methods, approaches, and instructional materials used for teaching comprehension.

### Henry Sabin Elementary Comprehension Survey

The purpose of this survey is to gain an understanding of what is already occurring in our school.

We want to know the good, bad and ugly so that we can keep the good and change the bad and ugly.

Thank you, Your Literacy Team

Grade Level: K    1    2    3    4    5

How does comprehension instruction look in your classroom?

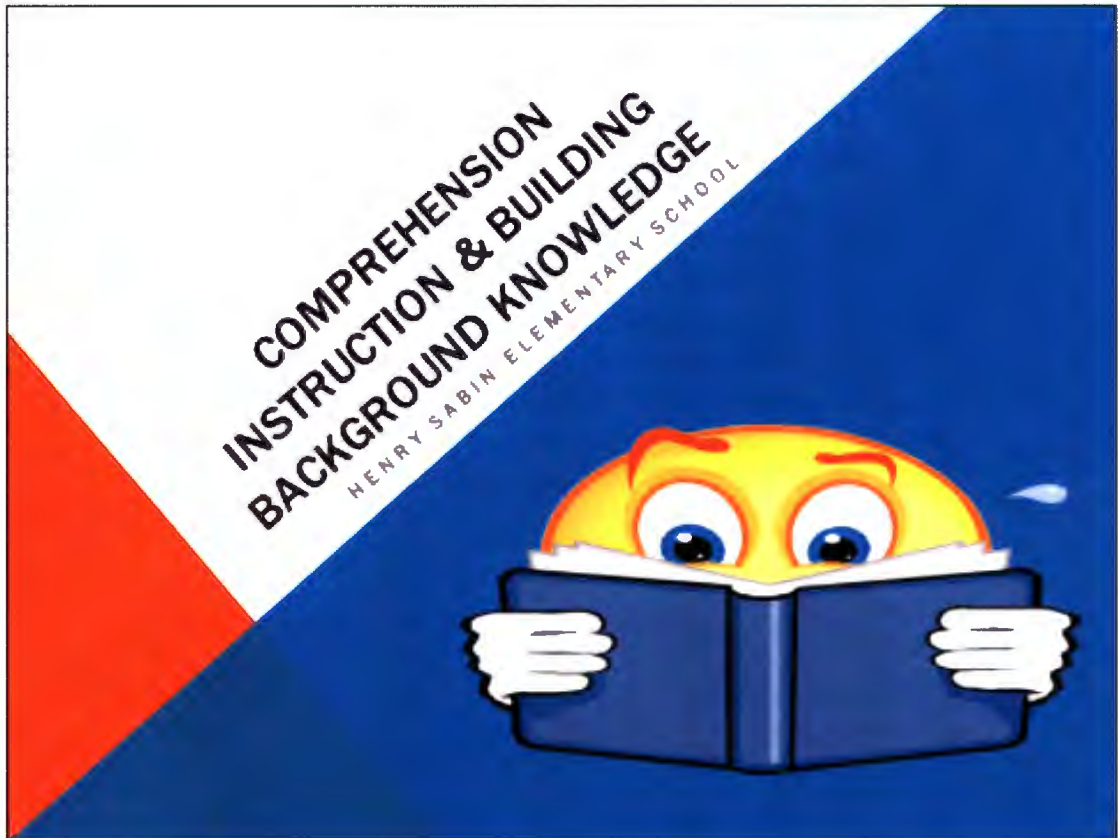
Are you happy with how you teach comprehension and why?

What do you feel needs to change with your comprehension instruction?

List any good resources you have used for teaching comprehension?



**Appendix C**  
**PowerPoint presentation**  
**August Year One**



- Educators need to explicitly teach comprehension strategies that can be applied to all texts.
- It is imperative that students gain in comprehension beyond the text, especially as we educate in an era of high stakes testing (Raphael & Au, 2005).

**"...students will be expected to read comfortably across genres within fiction, nonfiction, procedural texts, and poetry. They will be required to successfully answer questions, 70% to 80% of which call for the integration, interpretation, critique, and evaluation of texts read independently...Over half of the higher level questions will require students to provide a short or extended written response rather than simply to select from multiple-choice options" (Raphael & Au, 2005, p. 206-207).**

#### **4 COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES**

- **Background Knowledge**
- **Questioning**
- **Summarizing**
- **Text Features & Structures**

## BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

**“Students build upon their prior experiences and their linguistic and experiential knowledge to assimilate and consolidate new knowledge by expanding, evaluating, and refining.**

**Background knowledge is critical to reading comprehension” (Coyne, et al, 2009, p. 235).**

## KWL

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SbEwCRsPWjU>

## SMART CHART

- Boynton and Blevins (2004) created the smart chart.

K <sub>now</sub>	W <sub>ant to know</sub>	L <sub>earned</sub>	B <sub>ackground</sub>
------------------	--------------------------	---------------------	------------------------

Read excerpt from [Magic Tree House Research Guides Polar Bears and the Arctic](#)

## QUESTIONS?





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**Appendix D**  
**PowerPoint presentation**  
**January Year One**

## QUESTIONING STRATEGIES

HENRY SABIN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



**“Question answering and question-answering instruction can lead to an improvement in memory for what was read, improvement in finding information in text, and deeper processing of text” (Stahl, 2004, p. 600).**

## QUESTIONING STRATEGIES

- **3-2-1 (Zygouris-Coe, Wiggins, & Smith, 2005)**
  - Summarize 3 important events, list 2 interesting things, ask 1 question
- **QtA (Liang & Dole, 2006)**
  - Questioning the author to find fallibility in text
- **QAR (Raphael & Au, 2005)**
  - Question Answer Relationships (in the book: right there and think & search, in my head: author & me and on my own)

## 3-2-1 STRATEGY

- **3 = summarize 3 important events**
- **2 = interesting things learned**
- **1 = question about text**

(Massey, 2003, p. 82) Comprehension Check List for guiding reading comprehension before, during, and after reading a text.

Prereading: Before you started reading, did you

- Set a purpose for reading – what do you need to find or figure out?
- Think about what you already know about the topic – a lot or a little?
- Look at the pictures and predict what the story is going to be about?
- Read the captions?
- Read the bold words?
- Read the table of contents?
- Read any summaries?
- Read the questions at the end of the chapter?

**DURING READING: WHILE YOU WERE READING, DID YOU**

- **Skip the word – is it one word that doesn't make sense? Did you try skipping that word and reading to the end of the sentence or paragraph? Did you go back to see if you knew what the word was or if you knew what it meant?**
- **Reread the paragraph and look for new information?**
- **Keep a mental picture of what's happening in your head?**
- **Summarize – stop every page or two pages and summarize the main points?**
- **Find that you could go on, or do you need more information from another student or teacher?**

**AFTER READING: AFTER YOU FINISHED READING, DID YOU**

- **Do a text check – was this text too hard, too easy, or just right?**
- **Reread the section, looking for new details?**
- **Develop questions – what might the teacher ask? What might be on a test?**
- **Check your predictions – were you right? If you weren't, did you decide why?**

**QUESTIONS?**



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**Appendix E**  
**PowerPoint presentation**  
**March Year One**





**“Question answering and question-answering instruction can lead to an improvement in memory for what was read, improvement in finding information in text, and deeper processing of text” (Stahl, 2004, p. 600).**

## QUESTIONING STRATEGIES

- **3-2-1 (Zygouris-Coe, Wiggins, & Smith, 2005)**
  - ✓ Summarize 3 important events, list 2 interesting things, ask 1 question
- **QtA (Liang & Dole, 2006)**
  - ✓ Questioning the author to find fallibility in text
- **QAR (Raphael & Au, 2005)**
  - ✓ Question Answer Relationships (in the book: right there and think & search, in my head: author & me and on my own)

## QTA (QUESTIONING THE AUTHOR)

- The strategy was developed to teach students to question, think, probe, associate, and critique the fallibility of authors to interact with text in a different way than previously taught (Liang & Dole, 2006).
- Teachers will ask broad questions about a particular text to get a discussion going; for example, What is the author trying to tell us here?, or Where is the author going with this? (Liang & Dole, 2006).
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uu3Nntw9xkU>

## QAR (QUESTION ANSWER RELATIONSHIPS)

- **In the book**
  - ✓ Right there: The answer is in one place in the text.
  - ✓ Think & Search: The answer is in the text but in different parts of the text.
- **In my head**
  - ✓ On my own: The answer is not in the text, readers use own ideas and experiences.
  - ✓ Author & me: The answer is not in the text, readers use text and own ideas.
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsud7AQWva8>

## QUESTIONS?



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